

# White House-CIA breach

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When the president cannot trust his own CIA, the nation faces dire consequences. Chicago Sun-Times columnist Robert Novak's revelations this week that CIA officer Paul R. Pillar is actively undermining President Bush fail to portray the depth of animosity between factions within the CIA and the White House.

Mr. Pillar, who currently serves on the CIA's National Intelligence Council (NIC) as National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for the Near East and South Asia, is the lead author of the classified National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's future recently leaked to the New York Times. The NIE is a gloomy assessment of the prospects for Iraq's stability. The timing of the leak just before Iraqi interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Washington visit and Mr. Bush's U.N. General Assembly speech was intended to undermine both leaders.

The purpose of the NIC is to support the director of central intelligence in his mission of providing guidance to the president. It is often described as the CIA's inhouse think tank. In carrying out their duties, NIOs like Mr. Pillar have regular contact with experts and academics outside government. According to Mr. Novak, Mr. Pillar has used these sessions to disclose the contents of the CIA's prewar advice to Mr. Bush. This is an egregious breach of confidence.

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The full dossier on Mr. Pillar raises disturbing questions regarding the National Intelligence Council's decision to rely on him as principal author of the NIE on Iraq. Mr. Pillar is a longstanding intellectual opponent of the policy options chosen by President Bush to fight terrorism.

In an assessment Mr. Pillar published this summer titled "Counterterrorism After Al Qaeda," he asserts that "the U.S. government undertook the military operation in Iraq primarily for reasons other than counterterrorism." Mr. Pillar's thrust is that effective counterterrorism operations against Ossama bin Laden combined with the Moslem reaction to the Iraq war have created "decentralized" terrorist cells. These cells, Mr. Pillar believes, will be even harder than al Qaeda for the CIA to defeat without "initiatives to address the reasons individuals gravitate toward terrorism in the first place." The paper can be read on the National Intelligence Council's website.

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In March 2001, when Mr. Pillar was Deputy Chief of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, he published a book called "Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy" outlining his prescription for counterterrorism. The book is undeservedly self-congratulatory, especially when Mr. Pillar boasts about the role of intelligence in reducing U.S. terrorist casualties by half only months before his office failed to prevent the worst terrorist attack

against Americans ever. To his credit, Mr. Pillar says the best option for handling al-Qaeda is to “eliminate the group.” But in every other significant respect, the book counsels the opposite of Mr. Bush’s policy choices.

Mr. Pillar criticizes as “simplistic” those who “think of terrorism simply as an evil to be eradicated.” He writes that “overheated rhetoric” about weapons of mass destruction results in “a tendency to treat the whole subject of terrorism in terms of body counts and to focus not just mainly but exclusively on the number of people (and more specifically the number of Americans) whom terrorism kills or might kill .” Mr. Pillar warns that this leads to “a tendency toward absolute solutions and a rejection of accommodation and finesse.”

“If counterterrorism is conceived of as a war,” Mr. Pillar writes, “it is a small step to conclude that in this war there is no substitute for victory and thus no room for compromise.”

Mr. Pillar’s prescription for counterterrorism is “more finesse and, if not less fight, then fighting in a carefully calculated and selective way.”

September 11 was the CIA’s most spectacular failure. It happened on Mr. Pillar’s watch. Afterward, he was reassigned to the National Intelligence Council. (At times since September 11, Mr. Pillar has served on assignment to the Counterterrorism Center.) At the CIA, a transfer from an operational unit to an analyst’s desk is a de facto demotion.

After September 11, Mr. Pillar must have seethed as one by one President Bush rejected his counterterrorism prescriptions. His managers surely knew when they assigned him to write the NIE on Iraq that such an

intellectual adversary of Mr. Bush could not objectively analyze Mr. Bush's policies and their consequences. They must have understood that Mr. Pillar would use his contact with academics outside government to criticize Mr. Bush's decisions.

Senior officials within the CIA are subverting Mr. Bush politically. In conversations I have had with senior CIA officials over the past two years, the tone has grown increasingly acerbic. I was in Switzerland and spoke with a veteran CIA officer when the furor over Valerie Plame's blown cover broke. The officer, a longtime Republican, denounced the White House for a "vindictive" leak. Long before Anonymous published "Imperial Hubris," CIA officials I spoke with called the White House "arrogant" and "hubristic."

This breach between the White House and CIA is dangerous. When there is mistrust between an intelligence agency and the political leadership, the peril is immense. Botched Israeli counterterrorist operations against Black September undermined Prime Minister Golda Meir's faith in the Mossad to such an extent that she disregarded the agency's warning of the impending 1973 Yom Kippur attack.

No matter how well the post-September 11 CIA performs its mission of protecting the country, if the White House cannot trust the agency, national security suffers. Porter Goss' first challenge as CIA director is to restore confidence between the agency and the president. If he fails, it will further undermine the CIA's already-tenuous support among policymakers. That could spell the end of the CIA as we know it.

*John B. Roberts II served in the Reagan White House. He writes frequently on*

*terrorism and national security affairs.*

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